United Nations CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/8-9

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Distr.: General
14 November 2018
Original: English

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao People's Democratic Republic*

1. The Committee considered the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (CEDAW/C/LAO/8-9) at its 1647th and 1648th meetings (see CEDAW/C/SR.1647 and CEDAW/C/SR.1648), held on 2 November 2018. The Committee's list of issues and questions is contained in CEDAW/C/LAO/Q/8-9 and the responses of the State party are contained in CEDAW/C/LAO/Q/8-9/Add.1

A. Introduction

2. The Committee appreciates the submission by the State party of its combined eighth and ninth periodic reports. It also appreciates the State party's follow-up report to the Committee's previous concluding observations (CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/7/Add.1) and its written replies to the list of issues and questions raised by the pre-sessional working group, as well as the oral presentation by the delegation and the further clarifications provided in response to the questions posed orally by the Committee during the dialogue.

3. The Committee commends the State party on its high-level delegation, which was headed by the Minister to the Prime Minister's Office and Vice President of the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children, Alounkeo Kittikhoun, and included representatives of the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Permanent Mission of the Lao People's Democratic Republic to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva.

B. Positive aspects

4. The Committee welcomes the progress achieved since the consideration in 2009 of the State party's combined sixth and seventh periodic reports (CEDAW/C/LAO/7) in undertaking legislative reforms, in particular the adoption of the following:

* Adopted by the Committee at its seventy-first session (22 October–9 November 2018).

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(a) Amended Law on the Office of the Public Prosecutor, in 2017, and the Law on Handling of Petitions, in 2015, providing for the submission of complaints and petitions;

(b) Law on Anti-Trafficking in Persons, in 2016;

(c) Revised Constitution, in 2015, providing for equality before the law, including on the grounds of gender;

(d) Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children, in 2015, criminalizing marital rape and prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination against women;

(e) Amended Law on State Budget, in 2015, guaranteeing gender equality in the expenditure of the State budget;

(f) Amended Law on Education, in 2015, providing for equal access to education for women and girls;

(g) Law on Civil Servants, in 2015, and the Amended Law on Labour, in 2013, providing for the equality of women and men in employment, as well as provisions for women in the areas of occupational safety, health and maternity benefits and protection;

(h) Law on Social Security, in 2013, allowing for women and men working in the informal economy to contribute voluntarily towards social protection;

(i) Law on Women's Union, in 2013, defining the mandate, rights and duties of the Lao Women's Union;

(j) Law on Law Making, in 2012, providing for the amendment of national legislation that is inconsistent with international human rights treaties;

(k) Amended Law on Criminal Procedure, in 2012, providing for the equality of women and men before the law and the people's courts;

(l) Law on Hygiene, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, in 2011, guaranteeing the right of all women to have access to health services, including obstetric care;

(m) Statistics Law, in 2010, providing for the collection of data disaggregated by gender.

5. The Committee welcomes the State party's efforts to improve its institutional and policy framework aimed at accelerating the elimination of discrimination against women and promoting gender equality, such as the following:

(a) Third national strategy for gender equality, 2016–2025, and the third five-year national action plan for gender equality, 2016–2020;

(b) The inclusion of measures, including temporary special measures, in the eighth national five-year socioeconomic development plan, 2016–2020, to advance women's human rights and their participation in employment and political and public life;

(c) Action plan for the implementation of the strategy for reproductive health for mothers, infants and children, 2016–2025;

(d) National action plan on the protection and elimination of violence against women and children, 2014–2020;

(e) Decree No. 137 on persons with disabilities, in 2014, guaranteeing the equal rights of women with disabilities;

(f) Strategy for the advancement of women of the Ministry of Education and Sports, 2014–2015, the strategy for the advancement of women of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2011–2015, the strategy for the advancement of women of the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, 2014–2025, and the action plan for the promotion of gender equality within water and sanitation projects in small towns of the Ministry of Public Works and Transport;

(g) Strategy for the promotion of gender equality in governance, 2012–2015;

(h) Second five-year strategy for the advancement of women, 2011–2015;

(i) National Assembly Women's Caucus, established in 2010, and the action plan of the National Assembly Women's Caucus, 2011–2015;

(j) Decree No. 509 on the promulgation of the national policy on education, in 2010, and the national action plan on education for all, 2003–2015, aimed at, inter alia, reducing and eliminating gaps in enrolment and graduation rates among women and girls.

6. The Committee welcomes the fact that, in the period since the consideration of the previous report, the State party has ratified or acceded to the following international and regional instruments:

(a) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, in 2012;

(b) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in 2009;

(c) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in 2009;

(d) Convention against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, in 2017;

(e) Night Work Convention, 1990 (No. 171) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2014;

(f) ILO Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards Convention), 1976 (No. 144), in 2010.

Sustainable Development Goals

7. The Committee welcomes the international support for the Sustainable Development Goals and calls for the realization of de jure (legal) and de facto (substantive) gender equality, in accordance with the provisions of the Convention, throughout the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Committee recalls the importance of Goal 5 and of the mainstreaming of the principles of equality and non-discrimination throughout all 17 Goals. It urges the State party to recognize women as the driving force of the sustainable development of the State party and to adopt relevant policies and strategies to that effect.

C. Parliament

8. The Committee stresses the crucial role of the legislative power in ensuring the full implementation of the Convention (see A/65/38, part two, annex VI). It invites the National Assembly, in line with its mandate, to take the necessary steps regarding the implementation of the present concluding observations between now and the submission of the next periodic report under the Convention.

D. Principal areas of concern and recommendations

Visibility of the Convention

9. The Committee notes with appreciation the fact that various training and awareness-raising activities on the Convention have been performed in the State party, including through the media. It is, however, concerned that women, in particular those living in rural and remote areas, have limited knowledge of their rights under the Convention and of the available remedies for violations of such rights.

10. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Intensify its efforts to enhance the awareness of all women — including women living in rural areas, women belonging to ethnic minority groups, women migrants, older women and women with disabilities — of their rights under the Convention and the remedies available to them to seek redress for violations of such rights, including by allocating sufficient resources for the translation of relevant laws into local languages and their wide dissemination throughout the State party through various media outlets, including radio broadcasting;**

(b) **Systematically promote knowledge and understanding of the Convention and gender equality among the relevant stakeholders, including government officials, parliamentarians, law enforcement officials, legal professionals, members of village mediation units and women's organizations, to strengthen the use of the Convention in the development and implementation of all legislation, policies and programmes aimed at the realization of substantive equality between women and men.**

Constitutional, legislative and policy framework

11. The Committee notes with appreciation the numerous legislative, administrative and policy measures that the State party has taken to guarantee equality between women and men and prohibit gender-based discrimination. It is, however, concerned about the insufficient implementation of those measures, as well as the absence of information on prosecutions and court decisions relating to gender-based discrimination against women.

12. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Ensure that the prohibition of discrimination against women is accompanied by appropriate enforcement mechanisms and sanctions, with the allocation of adequate human, technical and financial resources;**

(b) **Reinforce the substantive equality of women and men by ensuring that gender-based discrimination against women is adequately addressed and ensure the enforcement of legislation that prohibits gender-based discrimination against women and girls.**

Access to justice

13. The Committee welcomes the legislative measures that the State party has taken to guarantee the right of women to submit complaints and to have access to justice, and that women may receive free legal aid through the Lao Bar Association. It is, however, concerned about the following:

(a) Persistent barriers, including stigma, fear of retribution, deep-rooted discriminatory gender stereotypes and limited legal literacy, that deter women and

girls from registering their complaints regarding gender-based discrimination and violence, including domestic violence, marital rape and sexual harassment;

(b) Insufficient information on the impact of existing complaint mechanisms in eliminating discriminatory gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination against women in the administration of justice.

14. **Recalling its general recommendation No. 33 (2015) on women's access to justice, the Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Ensure that women have effective access to justice, including by allocating adequate human, technical and financial resources to enhance legal literacy among women, providing mandatory capacity-building for the judiciary, law enforcement officials and village mediation units and ensuring access to free legal aid and interpretation services;**

(b) **Ensure that women who are victims of gender-based discrimination and violence can file complaints without fear of retribution or stigma and have access to effective remedies and victim support, such as medical and psychological assistance and shelters;**

(c) **Monitor and assess the impact on women of efforts to improve access to justice, including the effectiveness of complaint mechanisms governed by the Law on Handling of Petitions, and provide information on those assessments in its next periodic report.**

National machinery for the advancement of women

15. The Committee notes that the National Assembly Women's Caucus, the Lao Women's Union and the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children have recently been merged to strengthen the implementation of legislation and policies on gender equality. It is, however, concerned about the limited resources and capacity of those institutions to coordinate and implement gender equality plans, policies and programmes effectively in all areas and at all levels of government.

16. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Ensure that the national machinery for the advancement of women has sufficient human, technical and financial resources to develop and implement policies and programmes aimed at achieving gender equality and that it works in a coordinated manner;**

(b) **Intensify efforts to ensure that public resources in the national budget are allocated using the principles of gender-responsive budgeting to accelerate the achievement of substantive equality between women and men;**

(c) **Regularly monitor and assess the impact of the activities undertaken by the national machinery to promote gender equality, including by improving the collection of data, disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity and other relevant factors, necessary to assess the effectiveness of gender policies and programmes.**

National human rights institution

17. The Committee notes the role of various governmental bodies, including the National Steering Committee on Human Rights and the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children, in promoting and protecting human rights. It is, however, concerned at the lack of a national human rights institution established in accordance with the principles relating to the status of national

institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles) required to promote and protect women's rights and gender equality sufficiently.

18. **The Committee reiterates its recommendation (CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/7, para. 14) that the State party establish an independent national human rights institution in accordance with the Paris Principles, with a broad mandate to promote and protect, inter alia, women's rights and gender equality.**

Civil society and non-governmental organizations

19. The Committee notes the adoption in 2012 of the Law on Law Making to introduce the principle of participation and consultation. It is, however, concerned that Decree No. 238 on association, of 2017, places undue restrictions on the activities of non-governmental organizations and associations and particularly restricts women from participating freely in such organizations.

20. **The Committee draws attention to the important role of independent civil society organizations in promoting, monitoring and advancing women's rights in the State party and recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Review the registration requirements for civil society and non-governmental organizations, to ensure that organizations, in particular women's rights organizations, are able to undertake their activities without undue restrictions;**

(b) **Provide financial and other forms of support for the operation and activities of civil society and women's organizations, in particular grass-roots organizations that assist women and girls who are victims of gender-based discrimination and violence.**

Temporary special measures

21. The Committee welcomes the adoption of targets under the eighth national five-year socioeconomic development plan, 2016–2020, to increase the participation of women in public office, particularly in the National Assembly, and in employment. It is, however, concerned that temporary special measures are restricted solely to increasing the participation of women in decision-making positions and that most targets for the representation of women, which are set at 20–25 per cent, are unable to produce a critical mass for change.

22. **In line with article 4 (1) of the Convention and the Committee's general recommendation No. 25 (2004) on temporary special measures, the Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Raise awareness of gender equality among politicians, in particular parliamentarians, community leaders and the general public, especially men, to promote an understanding of the importance of temporary special measures and establish a legal basis for the implementation of temporary special measures;**

(b) **Set targets for the representation of women at a minimum of 30 per cent, provide for outreach and support programmes and other proactive results-oriented measures and allocate sufficient resources for the implementation of temporary special measures, with a view to achieving substantive equality between women and men in all areas covered by the Convention;**

(c) **Encourage the adoption of temporary special measures at the local level, in particular in the areas of education, employment and political participation, to address intersecting forms of discrimination against women, especially women living in rural areas, women belonging to ethnic minority**

groups, women living in poverty, female heads of household and women with disabilities;

(d) **Track progress achieved in the implementation of temporary special measures and expand them to all areas covered by the Convention in which women are underrepresented or disadvantaged, such as health, education and employment, and with respect to access to social and economic benefits.**

Stereotypes and harmful practices

23. The Committee welcomes the measures taken to combat discriminatory gender stereotypes and harmful practices against women and girls, including through public awareness campaigns and capacity-building programmes for civil servants and the judiciary. It remains concerned, however, about the persistence of discriminatory gender stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society, which contribute to the perpetuation of harmful practices, such as child marriage, and the high levels of gender-based violence against women and girls, including domestic violence.

24. **Recalling joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014) on harmful practices, and in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to eliminate discriminatory gender stereotypes, harmful practices and the stigma experienced by women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence;**

(b) **Implement long-term awareness-raising campaigns to eliminate discriminatory gender stereotypes and harmful practices, with the active participation of women and women's organizations, targeting men and boys, as well as political and community leaders, village chiefs, the media, employers and the general public;**

(c) **Remove discriminatory gender stereotypes from textbooks and school curricula, integrate mandatory modules on gender education and provide gender training to all teachers;**

(d) **Monitor the implementation of the measures taken and assess their impact on the eradication of discriminatory gender stereotypes and harmful practices.**

Gender-based violence against women

25. The Committee welcomes the measures taken to combat gender-based violence against women, including the criminalization of marital rape and the development of a related national action plan. It also notes with appreciation the national studies on violence against women, the establishment of counselling services and shelters for victims and various education and awareness-raising programmes. However, it remains concerned about the following:

(a) The high prevalence of gender-based violence against women, especially domestic and sexual violence and rape;

(b) The low rates of reporting among women who are victims of domestic violence and the social stigma associated with it;

(c) The persistent, although not mandatory, use of alternative forms of dispute resolution, in particular village mediation units, for domestic and sexual violence cases;

(d) The limited training provided to law enforcement personnel, public health officials and members of village mediation units on identifying all forms of gender-based violence against women and addressing individual cases in a gender-sensitive manner;

(e) The limited number of shelters for women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence, in particular domestic violence, who live in rural and remote areas;

(f) The lack of data on cases of gender-based violence against women that have been investigated and have led to prosecutions and on the sanctions imposed on perpetrators, disaggregated by age and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.

26. **Recalling its general recommendation No. 35 (2017) on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19, the Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Ensure the effective implementation of legislation on gender-based violence against women and girls, particularly the Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children, including by allocating sufficient human, financial and technical resources for the effective handling of complaints and operation of referral systems;**

(b) **Encourage women and girls to report all cases of gender-based violence against them, including by enhancing awareness-raising campaigns through media and public education campaigns;**

(c) **Ensure that women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence have direct access to legal remedies and victim and witness assistance and protection programmes and that village mediation units do not constitute an obstacle to access for women to formal justice, in particular in cases of domestic and sexual violence;**

(d) **Provide capacity-building programmes for judges, prosecutors, the police and other law enforcement officials, legal practitioners, health-service providers and members of village mediation units to ensure that all cases of gender-based violence are investigated and prosecuted in a gender-sensitive manner;**

(e) **Ensure that women and girls who are victims of domestic violence, in particular those who live in remote areas, have adequate access to shelters, psychosocial counselling, legal assistance and protection orders against abusive partners;**

(f) **Systematically collect data on gender-based violence against women and girls, in particular domestic and sexual violence, disaggregated by age, ethnicity and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, as well as on protection orders, the number of prosecutions made and the sentences imposed on perpetrators.**

Trafficking and exploitation of prostitution

27. The Committee welcomes the adoption of legislation and national action plans on trafficking, as well as the establishment, in 2011, of the National Steering

Committee on Human Trafficking and the anti-trafficking divisions within police departments across the country. It is, however, concerned about the following:

(a) The increased risk faced by women and girls in rural and remote areas of being trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation or forced labour, as well as trafficking in the guise of fraudulent marriage, and the insufficient measures available to address the root causes of trafficking, including poverty and lack of economic opportunities;

(b) The lack of a formal mechanism to monitor trafficking and exploitation of prostitution, as well as insufficient early identification mechanisms and referral systems for victims;

(c) The insufficient measures to protect victims and provide them with the necessary information and support;

(d) The lack of a legislative framework to prevent the exploitation of women who engage in surrogacy.

28. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Conduct systematic awareness-raising campaigns about the risks and criminal nature of trafficking and address the root causes of trafficking and exploitation of women and girls, including by offering vocational training and alternative income opportunities to girls and women who are at risk;**

(b) **Ensure the early identification of victims of trafficking and their referral to the appropriate services for assistance and rehabilitation, including by strengthening interministerial coordination through the sufficient allocation of resources, providing mandatory capacity-building to law enforcement officials and ensuring the participation of civil society organizations in the implementation of the national action plans;**

(c) **Investigate, prosecute and adequately punish perpetrators of trafficking in persons, ensure the protection of women and girls who are victims of trafficking and provide them with free and immediate access to specialized shelters, medical care, psychosocial counselling, legal aid and rehabilitation and reintegration services;**

(d) **Adopt a legislative and policy framework that ensures legal protection against exploitation for women who engage in surrogacy.**

29. The Committee remains concerned about the insufficient measures taken to provide support to women and girls who are exploited in prostitution.

30. **The Committee reiterates its previous recommendations (CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/7, para. 30) and recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Investigate and punish individuals who exploit women and girls in prostitution;**

(b) **Study the prevalence of prostitution in the State party to identify and address the root causes of prostitution;**

(c) **Provide assistance, including health care and rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, for women and girls exploited in prostitution and exit programmes for women wishing to leave prostitution.**

Participation in political and public life

31. The Committee welcomes the increase in the proportion of women in the National Assembly and in the judiciary and the continued commitment expressed by

the State party to increase the participation of women in political decision-making, as evident in a number of policy measures taken to encourage their participation. However, it remains concerned at the low number of women in decision-making positions at the provincial and local levels, where women constitute only 8 per cent of deputy provincial governors and 6 per cent of district mayors.

32. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Establish clear procedures for the implementation of temporary special measures, including those outlined in the eighth national five-year socioeconomic development plan, 2016–2020, to ensure gender equality in the appointment of women to decision-making positions in the Government, the foreign service, the judiciary, the police and the military;**

(b) **Provide training and capacity-building programmes for women wishing to enter political life or to hold public office at all levels, including at the local level, and in senior management positions;**

(c) **Raise awareness among politicians, community leaders and the general public that the full, equal, free and democratic participation of women on an equal basis with men in political and public life is a requirement for the effective implementation of the Convention.**

Nationality

33. The Committee commends the State party for its legal framework governing the acquisition of nationality. It is, however, concerned about the low rates of birth registration, in particular in rural areas and among ethnic minority groups.

34. **The Committee recommends that the State party intensify efforts to facilitate the timely birth registration of children, especially in rural and remote areas, by conducting awareness-raising campaigns, removing language barriers and deploying mobile civil registration units.**

Education

35. The Committee welcomes the measures taken to increase access to education and improve literacy and enrolment rates among women and girls. It is, however, concerned about the following:

(a) The limited access to primary and secondary education for girls, partly due to the indirect costs of education, household chores, language barriers and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory gender stereotypes regarding their roles and responsibilities in the family and in society;

(b) The lack of data on dropout rates among girls owing to pregnancy, and insufficient measures taken to ensure their re-entry and retention in school following childbirth;

(c) The disproportionately low rates of enrolment among women and girls in vocational schools and higher education, particularly in non-traditional fields of study, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics;

(d) The high illiteracy rates among women and girls, in particular among certain ethnic groups, and the findings of the 2015 population and housing census, which indicated poor outcomes for women and girls in school attendance and educational attainment;

(e) The limited availability of intercultural education for girls belonging to ethnic minority groups.

36. **In line with its general recommendation No. 36 (2017) on the right of girls and women to education, the Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Ensure that all girls and women, in particular those living in rural and remote areas, have access to education by eliminating indirect costs of schooling and imposing sanctions for non-compliance, adapting the educational methodology to ensure that schoolwork can be balanced with household chores, improving the quality of teaching and school infrastructure and strengthening the capacity of teachers to provide intercultural education;**

(b) **Eliminate discriminatory stereotypes that impede access for girls to education and raise awareness among parents and community leaders of the importance of education for women;**

(c) **Adopt strategies to encourage and monitor school enrolment, attendance, retention and reintegration after dropout, based on data disaggregated by sex, location, age, school type and ethnicity for all levels of education;**

(d) **Implement measures, including temporary special measures, to increase enrolment among women and girls in secondary and higher education and in non-traditional fields of study, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics;**

(e) **Intensify efforts to provide non-formal education and other adult literacy programmes, especially for women in rural areas.**

Employment

37. The Committee notes with appreciation the legislative measures taken to guarantee equal pay for work of equal value, prohibit discrimination on the basis of pregnancy or maternity status and raise the minimum wage. It also notes the adoption of an action plan for the promotion of decent work and efforts to strengthen the labour inspection system. The Committee is, however, concerned about the following:

(a) The persistence of vertical and horizontal labour force segregation and the wide gender pay gap, the fact that women generally work longer hours than men and the limited implementation and monitoring of the principle of equal pay for work of equal value;

(b) The concentration of women in the informal employment sector and in low paid jobs, including the garment industry, who work in unfavourable conditions and do not receive adequate protection from discrimination and exploitation;

(c) Insufficient maternity protection, in particular for women working in the private sector, which undermines their job security in case of pregnancy;

(d) The absence of a clear legal framework governing sexual harassment in the workplace and the absence of complaints made by women on sexual harassment in the workplace;

(e) The large proportion of women who are unpaid family workers, partly due to the influence of traditional norms and discriminatory stereotypes regarding gender roles and the relatively lower level of educational attainment among women.

38. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Improve access for women to formal employment by strengthening professional training for women, promoting the equal sharing of domestic and family responsibilities between women and men and ensuring that the principle of equal pay for work of equal value is adhered to in all sectors;**

(b) Monitor and improve the working conditions of women in the informal and private sectors, in particular through regular labour inspections to combat exploitative labour practices that women face and monitoring the implementation of the minimum wage in all sectors, and conduct a study of the possibility of expanding the programme for labour standards in the garment sector, both within that sector as well as to other sectors;

(c) Adopt a national scheme to finance the provision of maternity benefits in the private sector, in order to eliminate the risk of women losing their jobs owing to pregnancy;

(d) Amend article 83 of the Labour Law to include a definition of sexual harassment and impose sanctions for perpetrators and adopt measures to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace, including by developing a system for filing complaints and ensuring that victims have effective access to redress;

(e) Recognize, reduce and redistribute the unpaid care and home-based labour done by women through investments in infrastructure and social services, such as childcare, elder care, health care, education and transportation, in line with the Committee's general recommendation No. 17 (1991) on measurement and quantification of the unremunerated domestic activities of women and their recognition in the gross national product;

(f) Consider ratifying the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) and Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156).

Health

39. The Committee welcomes the measures taken to improve access for women to health-care services, including through financial assistance for pregnant women, the deployment of fixed and mobile health-care units and public education campaigns on reproductive health. It also welcomes the progress made in reducing maternal mortality and encouraging the use of contraceptives. The Committee is, however, concerned about the following:

(a) The persistently high rates of maternal mortality, early pregnancy and malnutrition, the limited access to antenatal and postnatal health-care services and the low rate of births attended by skilled health personnel, particularly in rural areas;

(b) Insufficient age-appropriate and comprehensive education on sexual and reproductive health and rights and family planning services and the high level of unmet need for access to contraception, in particular among girls and unmarried women;

(c) The absence of information on the prevalence of cervical and breast cancer, and other health issues affecting women and girls;

(d) The criminalization of abortion in all cases except where the life of the pregnant woman is at risk;

(e) The absence of information on unsafe abortion and its impact on women's health, including maternal mortality.

40. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) Improve the coverage of and access to health services throughout its territory and intensify efforts to reduce the incidence of maternal mortality and malnutrition, including by training midwives and other health professionals, especially in rural areas;

(b) Ensure that all women have access to good-quality sexual and reproductive health-care services, including access to modern contraceptives and age-appropriate education on sexual health, as well as information, including in local languages, on family planning and the prevention of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections;

(c) Improve data collection on the prevalence of cervical and breast cancer in the State party and provide training to medical and health professionals on the early detection and treatment of those diseases, including in rural areas;

(d) Legalize abortion in cases of risk to the health of the pregnant woman, rape, incest or severe fetal impairment and decriminalize it in all other cases;

(e) Collect data, disaggregated by age and region, on unsafe abortion and the impact on women's health, including maternal mortality, and on other health issues affecting women, such as mental health, to assess the status of women's health and improve relevant services.

HIV/AIDS

41. The Committee welcomes the measures taken in the framework of the Law on HIV/AIDS Control and Prevention of 2010 and the national strategic and action plan on the control and prevention of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections for the period 2011–2015, to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, including through training and the delivery of antiretroviral medication. It is, however, concerned about the disproportionately high prevalence of HIV/AIDS cases among women and the sustainability of existing programmes, which are largely dependent on international donor funding.

42. **The Committee recommends that the State party guarantee equal access for women and men to HIV/AIDS prevention and adequate treatment resources, as well as free access to antiretroviral medicines for women and girls, paying particular attention to women in prostitution and migrant women. It also recommends that the State party take measures to combat discrimination and stigmatization faced by women and girls living with HIV/AIDS and adopt coordinated and adequately funded measures to ensure the sustainability of current programmes.**

Economic and social benefits

43. The Committee notes with appreciation the adoption of the Law on Social Security in 2013 and the national strategy for social protection, as well as programmes for the economic empowerment of women, including women's savings groups at the village level and the Microfinance Institute. It is, however, concerned that:

(a) Several groups of women, including migrant women, women living in poverty and women in unpaid work or working in the agricultural or informal sectors, do not have access to social protection or social security;

(b) Women often face barriers to financial resources and acquisition, despite legislation that guarantees the equal rights of women and men to the use of banking and credit systems.

44. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) Ensure that all women engaged in unpaid work or in the informal sector, both in rural and urban areas, have access to non-contributory social protection schemes and introduce for women in the informal and rural

economies the cash benefits in case of maternity, disability and old age that are available under the formal economy social security scheme;

(b) **Remove barriers that prevent migrant women from gaining access to social protection benefits, including by modifying the eligibility requirements regarding documentation and the minimum qualifying periods and expanding coverage to all sectors;**

(c) **Adopt gender-responsive social protection floors to ensure that all rural women have access to essential health care, childcare facilities and income security, in line with ILO Recommendation No. 202 concerning national floors of social protection;**

(d) **Implement targeted measures to increase access for women to financial services, including low-interest credit and savings schemes, and promote their entrepreneurial activities by providing technical assistance, counselling and training in enterprise development and management.**

Rural women

45. The Committee commends the State party on its efforts to combat poverty in rural areas, including through poverty reduction funds and the national growth and poverty eradication strategy. However, it remains concerned about the disparities faced by rural women and women belonging to ethnic minority groups with regard to access to basic public social services, land and property, and about the low level of political participation of rural women, who constitute only 2.6 per cent of village chiefs. The Committee is also concerned about the insufficient measures taken by the State party to address the issue of unexploded ordnance, which not only puts rural women and girls at risk of injury, disability or death but also prevents the use of large amounts of land for agricultural and other purposes essential for economic development.

46. **In line with its general recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women, the Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Implement measures, including temporary special measures, to increase access for rural women to education, health, competitive markets and income-generating activities, including by integrating a provision into the national rural employment strategy for support to young rural women, women heads of household and women with disabilities;**

(b) **Ensure that the draft amendment of the Land Law provides for greater ownership of key assets by rural women active in the agricultural sector, mainstream gender into national policies concerning the agricultural sector and ensure that women's agricultural collectives are a key target beneficiary of economic benefits arrangements and that women are equal actors in decision-making in that sector;**

(c) **Strengthen efforts to address the factors impeding the political participation of women and adopt proactive policy measures, with sufficient resources, to promote and empower women to participate in political and public life in rural areas, as well as in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of local development policies and community projects;**

(d) **Set a target for a minimum percentage of women village chiefs and take measures for its achievement;**

(e) **Take measures, through international cooperation, to address the issue of unexploded ordnance, to clear it and to raise awareness among rural**

women and girls to prevent injuries or deaths from unexploded ordnance and promote economic development.

Migrant women

47. The Committee notes the establishment of employment agencies and resource centres, as well as institutional mechanisms, including a designated steering committee within the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and labour attachés in embassies, to support migrant workers. However, it remains concerned that a large number of Lao women who migrate to other countries through informal channels in search of employment remain vulnerable to exploitation and that returning migrant women do not receive adequate reintegration support.

48. **The Committee reiterates its previous recommendations (CEDAW/C/LAO/CO/7, para. 43) and recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Adopt a comprehensive gender-sensitive migration policy to protect Lao migrant workers abroad effectively, in accordance with the Committee's general recommendation No. 26 (2008) on women migrant workers, and to address the root causes of migration among women;**

(b) **Review and renew, as appropriate, existing bilateral agreements and memorandums of understanding with countries to which Lao women migrate in search of work, with a view to strengthening such agreements to bring them into conformity with the Convention, prevent the exploitation of migrant women and bring perpetrators of exploitation to justice;**

(c) **Strengthen efforts to raise awareness, through predeparture briefings and public information campaigns, among women migrant workers about their rights, the risks they may face and available remedies in case of violations of their rights;**

(d) **Develop and implement regulations concerning employment agencies for migrant workers, with sanctions for non-compliance, to ensure that migrant women are protected from exploitation;**

(e) **Provide gender-sensitive support to returning women migrant workers for their reintegration, including through the provision of income-generating opportunities.**

Marriage and family relations

49. The Committee is concerned about the persistent prevalence of early marriage and polygamy, despite their prohibition, and the insufficient measures taken to address the root causes of those practices. It is also concerned that gender-based violence against women in the domestic context is not taken into account in child custody and visitation decisions.

50. **The Committee recommends that the State party:**

(a) **Ensure the strict application of the Family Law, which prohibits early marriage and polygamy, in particular among rural and ethnic communities;**

(b) **Address the root causes of early marriage and polygamy and carry out public awareness-raising programmes to end such practices, including campaigns on the negative health, education and livelihood consequences of early pregnancy and marriage for girls, in cooperation with women's organizations and the communities concerned;**

(c) **Adopt measures to protect girls already in early marriages and unions;**

(d) **Ensure that gender-based violence against women in the domestic sphere is taken into account in child custody and visitation decisions.**

Disaster risk reduction and climate change

51. The Committee is concerned about the insufficient participation of women in the development of policies and strategies in all matters having an impact on their lives, particularly with regard to disaster risk reduction and climate change, considering that the State party is susceptible to flooding and drought.

52. **In line with its general recommendation No. 37 (2018) on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change, the Committee recommends that the State party ensure the participation of women in the preparation, adoption and implementation of national policies and programmes on climate change, disaster response and risk reduction and include an explicit gender perspective in such policies. It also recommends that the State party increase substantially the number of women in related decision-making bodies, including the National Committee for Natural Disaster Prevention and Control.**

Data collection and analysis

53. **While noting with appreciation the Law on Statistics of 2010 and the establishment of a national database, the Committee recommends that the State party enhance the collection, analysis and dissemination of comprehensive data, disaggregated by sex, age, disability, ethnicity, location and socioeconomic status, and the use of measurable indicators to assess trends in the situation of women and progress towards the realization of substantive equality between women and men in all areas covered by the Convention.**

Optional Protocol to the Convention and amendment to article 20 (1) of the Convention

54. **The Committee encourages the State party to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention and to accept, as soon as possible, the amendment to article 20 (1) of the Convention concerning the meeting time of the Committee.**

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

55. **The Committee calls upon the State party to use the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in its efforts to implement the provisions of the Convention.**

Dissemination

56. **The Committee requests the State party to ensure the timely dissemination of the present concluding observations, in the official languages of the State party, to the relevant State institutions at all levels (national, regional and local), in particular to the Government, the ministries, the National Assembly and the judiciary, to enable their full implementation.**

Technical assistance

57. **The Committee recommends that the State party link the implementation of the Convention to its development efforts and that it avail itself of regional or international technical assistance in this respect.**

Ratification of other treaties

58. **The Committee notes that the adherence of the State party to the nine major international human rights instruments [1] would enhance the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms in all aspects of life. The Committee therefore encourages the State party to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, to which it is not yet a party.**

Follow-up to the concluding observations

59. **The Committee requests the State party to provide, within two years, written information on the steps taken to implement the recommendations contained in paragraphs 36 (b), 40 (e) and 46 (a) above.**

Preparation of the next report

60. **The Committee requests the State party to submit its tenth periodic report, which is due in November 2022. The report should be submitted on time and cover the entire period up to the time of its submission.**

61. **The Committee requests the State party to follow the harmonized guidelines on reporting under the international human rights treaties, including guidelines on a common core document and treaty-specific documents (HRI/GEN/2/Rev.6, chap. I).**

[1] The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.